

A Staff & Faculty Guide to International Students

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International Students have attended courses at many U.S. Army Schools under the Security Assistance Training Program (SATP) since 1961. This program is under the purview of the DSCA and administered by the Security Assistance Training Field Activity (SATFA) at Ft Monroe, Virginia.

The focal point for SATP at the schoolhouse is the International Military Student Office (IMSO). The IMSO handles all administrative matters for International Military Students (IMS) from their arrival through their departure. Additionally, the IMSO is responsible for the Informational Program (IP).

The IP is a DoD program designed to introduce international students to the Customs, Culture, and Traditions of the United States, focusing specifically on our commitment to internationally recognized Human Rights. This is done through a series of classes and tours.

A basic understanding of the SATP, the IMSO, & the IP can help instructors to prepare for teaching IMS.

While Diplomacy and Protocol have a prominent place in the Security Assistance Training program, they are not at the top of the priority list at the schoolhouse. Training is the primary emphasis.

Training is #1

When an IMS arrives at an U.S. Military School, his mission is clear - Get the training. While it is true, some IMS get here through political connections or family influence, the vast majority is here to learn. To trivialize that mission by implementing policies that everyone passes the course is a huge mistake.

It benefits the students who are not motivated, and degrades the value of a course diploma. It actually discourages those students who are committed to excel. The very students that the program is designed to impress will leave disappointed.

The School Cadre must be willing and able to identify which students are making a sincere effort to overcome the difficulties of training in another language, and which are just trying to get by. A sincere effort must be recognized and rewarded, regardless of test scores. Likewise, apathy to training must be addressed. Students, who skip classes or show up late, don't participate in practical exercises or study must be held accountable.

The Dreaded International Incident

Urban Legends about international students are everywhere - the guy who killed an instructor for giving a thumbs up sign; the guy who failed the course and his country killed him; the Captain who was promoted to General because he did well in the course. They seem to become more bizarre every year.

There is a fear of the unknown. When an international student reports to class, his status might not be apparent. His background is not obvious. His attitude and motivation may give the impression that he is here for a vacation, or because he has political connections, or any number of reasons. Regardless of the impression, the mission is training.

It is imperative that one individual's concept of diplomacy does not interfere with the training mission.

The Advantages of Training International Students

There are a number of benefits to training international students, even if overcoming language and culture is a problem.

1. Most of the operations the U.S. Army is involved with are in conjunction with one or more of our allies. Experience instructors and U.S. students gain working with internationals can be a great benefit in such operations.
2. The more U.S. training a foreign country has, the less likely they are to need U.S. assistance in solving their conflicts.

3. The experience that many international students bring to class with them is a valuable asset for instructors. Experience is a great teacher.

4. U.S. students that help IMS overcome language or technical difficulties reinforce their own knowledge base.

Common Questions

Do International Students take exams? - Yes! International students are required to take the same tests and retests as U.S. students. There is room for judgement, if an IMS fails a retest and can still demonstrate a clear understanding of the subject, he may still be eligible for a diploma. However, a diploma is not guaranteed to anyone.

Can an International Student be Recycled? - It is possible, but not likely. If an international student fails to achieve the passing standard academically, he is usually allowed to finish the course and awarded a Certificate of Attendance instead of a Diploma.

What are the prerequisites for International Students - Prior to being selected for training International students are required to meet prerequisites in 3 areas.

1. Grade/rank requirements
2. Prior training or experience requirements
3. English Comprehension Level

All of these prerequisites are judged by the Security Assistance Officer (SAO) at the U.S. Embassy or equivalent before they are sent to the U.S. Identifying qualified candidates can be a significant challenge. Sometimes waivers are given at the request of the country for special circumstances.

International students from all branches of service are eligible to train at U.S. Army Schools.

What about Religious Holidays and Prayer Time? - International Students are required to attend classes as they are scheduled. Some schools and courses, especially those dealing exclusively with international students have made certain religious accommodations. However, no such accommodations are required. Islamic students can pray during lunch hours on Fridays.

Each country authorizes two holidays annually. If an international student is in good standing in the course, and there are no major course requirements during one of these holidays, an IMS may be given a one-day holiday. A list of authorized holidays for each country is available at the IMSO.

If they have to pass an English Test, why don't they speak English? - The English Comprehension Level (ECL) exam most IMS are required to take does not test speaking ability. It judges a student's ability to understand the written and spoken word. Additionally, the test is focused on conversational English.

In some cultures, making a public mistake means a loss of face. Add in the American sense of humor and the tendency to laugh at unusual pronunciation or grammar, and some students are very reluctant to speak.

What is significant is not whether or not a student can "shoot the bull", but whether or not he can demonstrate an understanding of the subject.

What About Physical Training? - Unless a course has physical requirements (like the Ranger Course) PT is not required to complete training. However, PT is encouraged in every case. Some countries require PT of their students, even if the course does not. The most common excuse for internationals not participating in PT is logistical. Most do not have vehicles. At the direction of the Battalion Commander the logistical problems have been solved and International Students are required to attend PT formations. The requirement to actually participate or not is left to their government.

How do LTCs get into a course for CPTs?

Waivers for a single grade variance are made automatically at the TRADOC level. A two-grade or more variance requires authorization from the school. These waivers are based on two things:

1. Do they meet the other course prerequisites?

2. Do they understand that they will be in class with students of appropriate rank and will receive no special consideration?

While some students may try to play the RHIP card, they have waived that right. In the training environment, all students are equal, regardless of rank. The instructor is in control of the classroom.

American Perceptions of International Students

Americans have images of International Students that can create some challenges for the International Military Student Office. Though people in the U.S. Military are among the most culturally aware citizens, there remains a tendency to judge individuals by the actions of their country or radical elements within their country.

A religiously conservative terrorist who plants a bomb in the Middle East reflects on a whole society. While a religiously conservative local terrorist who burns a series of churches or plants a bomb in an abortion clinic in the U.S. is considered to be on the lunatic fringe.

Americans do not make these judgments of all International Students, nor do they apply all of them to a single individual.

Nonetheless, anti-foreign sentiments can seriously impact the impressions International Students take home with them. It is important to be prepared.

Some Common American Perceptions of the World

Internationals don't Respect Women- Relationships between men and women are as old as time. Cultures play a large part in defining these roles. It is true that in many places men and women do not have the same rights and privileges. Construing these cultural differences as disrespect is not productive.

This is a very sensitive subject for some students. It is important to inform international students about how men and women react to each other professionally. It is equally important to reserve judgment of international cultures and not impose your values.

Internationals are Anti-American - The "Yankee Go Home" sentiment has appeared around the world. The United States has a high visibility and our Foreign Policy creates strong reactions.

While we view our international policies as reflections of President John Kennedy's call for "...what together we can do for the freedom of man." they are not always perceived that way.

Most students are proud of their own countries and cultures, and happy to be here to learn. People who are proud of their own countries and cultures are frequently viewed as judgmental and ethnocentric.

In highly competitive cultures, national pride can be misconstrued. When working in a multi-cultural environment, it is important to understand that different is not necessarily greater or lessor.

The Rest of the World is Impoverished - International Organizations like C.A.R.E. and Save the Children routinely advertise the plights of the world in their search for assistance. Military missions like the one in Somalia expand the image.

While the small percentage of the World's population who is starving to death may appreciate sympathy, it is doubtful that many of the international students we train fall into that category. Sympathy steps on pride and patriotism. Avoid terms like "Third World" that imply judgment.

International Students aren't Really Here to Learn - This perception can devalue Security Assistance Training on many levels and must be addressed whenever it arises.

While it is true that a very few international students get here through political or family connections, this label can not be applied to the whole program.

Most international students are excited about what they will learn in class, and meeting and working with Americans.

Maintain a Practical Perspective

It is important when working with Americans who are inexperienced or untrained in Security Assistance to keep a positive frame of reference. Don't let anyone make generalizations about international students at any level.

Stereotyping is the root of evil. Stereotypes label people without knowing them. It builds a competitive atmosphere of "Us and Them" that is destructive to the Security Assistance Training Mission.

International Perceptions of the United States

The world is inundated with images of the United States. International news organizations focus on the U.S.; many have headquarters here. Bad news attracts more viewers and sells more commercials. Images of Monica Lewinski, Columbine High School, and the Oklahoma City bombing create lasting impressions.

Throw in the fantasies perpetuated by Hollywood and international propaganda and many international students, here for the first time, have strong opinions.

While these images are not exclusively negative, they create misconceptions that influence the thoughts and actions of international students.

Though not all students have any or all of these perceptions, it is important to address them.

Some International Perceptions -

Americans are Rich - They drive big cars, live in big houses, fly their own planes. They pay more for a shirt with a name on it. This can create a financial wall. Some students conclude that they are not financially capable of socializing with Americans. It is difficult to identify.

Americans are Sexually Promiscuous - The images are prolific, even at the highest levels. Discretion practiced in other places is a victim of an exuberant entertainment industry and Free Press. The actions of a few reflect on everyone. This makes sexual harassment training seem hypocritical.

Americans are Uninformed about the rest of the world - Sad but true, most Americans know little of the Countries of the World unless they hosted an Olympics or a War involving U.S. troops. America's history of isolationism is reflected in our education system.

Americans are Violent / Gun Wielding - High Profile Violence seems to show up on the Nightly News once a week. School shootings, handguns, violent extremists, the stories seem endless. The Constitution ensures the right to bear arms. Freedom has a price. If motorcycles were illegal, fewer people would die in motorcycle accidents. The Constitution reflects the will of the people and will not change against their will. Regardless of senseless deaths to guns, America has one of the longest life expectancies in the World.

Americans don't like Children - Retirement communities, birth control, legalized abortions. Sixty percent of American mothers have a job outside the home. The changes in the size of the American Family are most likely a result of the impact of - the Great Depression, when jobs and food were hard to come by, followed by WWII, when many women felt it was their patriotic duty to have a job outside their home. While WWII was followed by the Baby Boom, successive years have shown an increase in the number of women in the workforce and a decrease in the number of children born to American families.

The United States is a Racist Country - News of racism is very high profile. The history of America's racial challenges is well documented and not that far removed. Though we are proud of our progress, racism continues to be a problem. Racism seems to have shifted from institutions to individuals. Some of these individuals are trying to create new institutions. These individuals attract a lot of attention from the media.

Americans don't respect their Elders - Old Folks Homes and Senior Citizens eating dog food are tough images to shake. Social Security is hard to live on. Though many cities have Senior Centers and businesses have Senior Discounts, the feeling is that families should take more responsibility for their elders.

Addressing Negative Judgments

It is human nature when comparing any two cultures to judge one to be better. Reserve judgment and encourage others to do the same. Discussing such issues is far more important than agreeing on which is right and which is wrong. Understanding some else's point of view does not imply changing yours.

Multi-Cultural Challenges

Security Assistance Training at the school level creates a multi-cultural environment. While many people have cross-cultural experience, i.e. individuals from one culture working with individuals from another culture, the IMSO is significantly more complex. A single student incident can label an entire group of International students whose only identifying factor is that they are not American.

Common Problems and Solutions

These are some of the recurring challenges of working in a multi-cultural environment.

Instructors complaining about International Students – Very few Instructor training courses address working in a multi-cultural environment. A few have a short block on cross-cultural communications that seem to lump together the rest of the world. By and large instructors get their multi-cultural experience in the classroom. This can be difficult at best.

The result is a lot of generalizations – “They don’t speak English”; “They are always late”; “They really don’t need this block of instruction.”

Direct communication with instructors is critical. Brief them on the dynamics of the class they will teach. Identify which individual students are strong English speakers and which might be difficult to understand. If you tell an instructor that one of your students has a heavy accent that is difficult for many Americans to understand, the instructor will probably take it as a personal challenge.

Don’t accept generalizations. If an instructor is complaining, ask for specifics - names, dates, places. Ask how the rest of the International Students are doing. Commit to addressing the problem on an individual basis.

Equally important is direct communication with your students. Let them know what is expected of them in the classroom environment. Tell them what they need to know.

International Students that don’t get along – Never assume that any two students will not get along. Most cross-cultural conflicts at the schoolhouse develop as a result of personalities. While some students may have been brought up in adversarial environments, they usually will not fight their wars here.

When international students do clash, either personally or patriotically, try to find common ground. Don’t take sides, often the best you can do is to talk them into agreeing to disagree and just stay away from each other.

International Free Pass Policies - Some instructors and faculty members don't have the time necessary to retrain and retest. They generate policies that pass all international students. This can be extremely detrimental to the program and the moral of students who work hard to learn. Don't let someone's opinion of "diplomacy" interfere with the training mission. Encourage the brightest students, aid those in distress, and be willing to let go those that won't make an effort.

Personal Problems - Tardiness, alcohol, cheating, the list is endless. The range and scope of personal problems is far too broad to address here on an individual basis. It is important to be prepared. Let them know who to contact when they have a problem and how you can help them.

Briefing international students on the rules is fundamental. Tell them how you deal with these problems, what security measures are in place and follow through when a problem occurs.

If you tell them the dangers and consequences of drinking and driving, then you are not responsible for what happens after they are arrested. You can not protect them from themselves.

Make sure they understand that they are responsible for their own actions, and you have a job you have to do.

In all cases it is imperative to keep the International Military Student Office informed of problems as they occur.

Tips for Working with International Students

- 1. Do Not Generalize** - People are like snowflakes, no two are the same. Cultural, Ethnic, or Religious stereotyping leads to trouble. People may have similar backgrounds, religions, or cultures, but their life experiences are different than anyone else in the world.
- 2. Do Not Fear the Dreaded International Incident** - It is an International Student's responsibility to adjust to training in the U.S. It is not the School or Instructor's responsibility to adjust to every culture in the World. While compassion and understanding are valuable assets in dealing with people everywhere, it is not necessary to give diplomacy priority over training.
- 3. Tolerance is Not the Answer** - Many people working cross-culturally believe that tolerance is the key. Consider what a humiliating experience it is to be tolerated. It implies that the person being tolerated is lesser. Save toleration for people who cut you off in traffic. Never tolerate someone who you expect to build an effective relationship with.
- 4. Accept Cultural Differences as a Way of Life** - Don't try to impose your culture on others or implement another culture here. It is much more effective to accept differences yourself and help students make the adjustments necessary to be successful in their training here.
- 5. Don't Make Excuses for Students** - Making excuses for international students behavior is like asking someone else to tolerate them. Take responsibility for letting your students know what you expect of them. Encourage others to treat them like anyone else. Remind your students of cultural details they may overlook.
- 6. Take Pride in the United States of America** - Don't make excuses for your country. Be proud of being an American. No system is perfect, accept the imperfections in our system. Prepare to defend the Constitution and the fact that it represents the will of the people.
- 7. Be Direct when providing Information** - Tell them what they need to know, what action you expect them to take. Tell them what action you intend to take and follow through.
- 8. Honesty is the best Policy, but Tact makes it easier to Take** - The truth can be brutal. Regardless of your knowledge or experience, try to convince your students that you will make a genuine effort for them. "I'll try" is better than "I can't", even if you fail, at least you tried. "I'll check on it" is better than "No" even if you are sure "No" will be the answer. When the outcome will be less than the student wants or expects, it is better to be initially evasive before you draw the hard line.
- 9. Don't Talk Down** - When dealing with foreigners, Americans commonly break up their grammar; delete conjunctions from their speech; and speak loudly. Talking down to International Students is easily recognized, even with students of limited English skills. If you have problems, try simplifying by rewording and using shorter sentences.
- 10. Clarify Misunderstandings** - Don't just smile and nod. If you don't understand what someone says, ask them to repeat. Try again, and again. If someone smiles and nods at you, find another way to make the point. Ask a question to test their understanding. Establish yourself as someone willing to invest the time necessary to communicate.

International Military Student Office Points of Contact

The International Military Student Office (IMSO) is located in room 148 of Nicholson Hall (Bldg 80505).

Office Hours are 0700 to 1700 Monday through Friday.

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